

## Moving Beyond Talk

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**Six conditions helped these urban districts launch—and sustain—strong learning communities.**

Professional learning communities are a growing forum for teacher learning. The opportunity to share ideas and reflect on teaching practice makes learning communities attractive. But it's easy for learning communities to become stalled at the stage of collegial discussions about improving teaching practice. What spurs communities to progress beyond talk to collective action that brings change to schools?

We observed the creation of teacher learning communities that stimulated action in three urban New Jersey school districts, through a five-year project supported by the Philanthropic Initiative on behalf of the international Alcatel-Lucent Foundation. Coaches from the National School Reform Faculty trained internal facilitators in these schools, who in turn launched collaborative learning communities (CLCs) among their peers. (We use the term *collaborative* to stress the expectation that participants would do more than engage in discussions.) These practices of the New Jersey Collaborative Learning Communities Initiative laid a good foundation; our observations indicate that many of the collaborative and innovative practices the project inspired are still embedded in many of the schools, although 2007–08 was the last year of formal funding.

The initiative was committed to documenting how the teachers' learning evolved over five years. As third-party external documenters, we watched the initiative unfold. We attended planning meetings, observed professional development, worked with districts to train and support local leaders, listened in as CLC groups gathered in individual schools, and interviewed and surveyed participants.<sup>1</sup> Through summer retreats, school-year seminars, and school-based meetings, we saw participants acquire the confidence and ability to nurture self-sustaining communities. These collaborative learning communities took many shapes. Some subject-area supervisors turned their monthly meetings into a functioning CLC, a superintendent organized cabinet meetings around the process, and many schools nurtured grade-level or subject-area groups. A common feature of success, as the following two snapshots make clear, was that teachers in these groups pushed one another to progress from talk to action.

### Two Snapshots of Growth

One of the participating districts had a burgeoning population of English language learners. Many classroom teachers readily admitted that they struggled to serve these students well. Recognizing that this issue had received no more attention than a few passing conversations, a group of English as a second language teachers in the district formed a learning community to explore proactive remedies. They met monthly for an hour after school and used the project's protocols to develop instructional resources they could share with colleagues who wanted to make their content meaningful to English language learners. However, group members felt hampered by a mandated lesson plan template for classroom teachers that offered little room for input from English as a second language teachers or other support teachers. In community meetings, they dissected the template, modified it to incorporate the perspectives of other professionals, developed a plan to put the revised template into place, and lobbied across the district for its approval. The resulting sense of empowerment led one teacher to reflect, "You need to share to grow instructionally, and the CLC is a good vehicle to do that."

In an elementary school, teachers created a collaborative learning community to address the issue of students' poor math comprehension. The across-grade-level group dug into a resource on applying reading strategies to math

instruction (Hyde, 2006). Twice a month, participants discussed how strategies like visualizing, asking questions, and predicting were relevant to math. But comments like "I don't think that would work in my class" began to crop up. Worried that their conversations might go for naught, the teachers selected a reading strategy and committed to applying the strategy to a particularly troublesome type of math problem. To the teachers' pleasant surprise, everyone reported gaining valuable insights into how their students approached this type of problem and how their teaching had contributed to students' mistakes.

Even the participants were a bit incredulous that setting norms for community behavior, using protocols, and reaching shared agreements about next steps turned passing conversations into satisfying professional growth in these scenarios. But these examples were not isolated developments. We heard many similar stories as we interviewed members of learning communities. Teachers repeatedly mentioned six conditions that heightened the quality of learning in collaborative communities: a preexisting supportive culture, time to meet, satisfying processes, voluntary participation, support from principals, and a cadre of trained facilitators.

## **A Supportive Culture**

When we asked teachers in schools where learning communities flourished to explain their colleagues' ready acceptance of this approach, teachers invariably referred to a special atmosphere permeating their buildings. The process of forming learning communities benefited tremendously from settings in which staff members already viewed colleagues as caring, cooperative, and intellectually curious. In such cultures, faculty refused to become professionally stagnant but realized, as one teacher said, "If you stop learning, you're dead." One interviewee explained, "It's just the nature of the school. ... People are willing to bare their concerns with people they don't even have a comfort level with yet." Of course, learning communities could be a factor in turning a distrusting environment around. But one of the best readiness indicators for implementing such communities successfully is a prior history of collegiality throughout a school.

## **Time to Meet**

Teachers in these schools craved planning time (which was scarce) and opportunities for shared planning (which were nonexistent). This reality made scheduling collaborative learning communities difficult, especially as schools weaned themselves from a structured, funded project after the initiative ended. In yearly surveys, participants highlighted the lack of time to talk with colleagues as one of the least satisfying parts of their jobs. During the first two years of the initiative, the Alcatel-Lucent Foundation and the districts encouraged learning communities to meet during the school day, funding substitutes to enable such gatherings for several hours a month. In subsequent years, they encouraged participants to shape long-term, sustainable daytime arrangements that didn't require paying substitutes. As groups fumbled for workable arrangements, they tried various formats. Some experimented with more frequent but shorter sessions, getting together before or after school or tacking a gathering onto monthly faculty meetings. None of these proved satisfactory. Short sessions precluded deep discussions; people were distracted with class preparations before the morning bell and were drained in the afternoon. Lengthy gaps between sessions hindered continuity. Participants were grateful for any morsels of time they received but acknowledged that short sessions only enabled them to maintain esprit de corps and did little to advance professional growth. It's a tribute to participants' excitement about meaningful professional dialogue that learning communities continued meeting in many schools after the initiative formally ended. But the bottom line, according to CLC members, is that extended blocks of time during the school day are the most productive structure for learning communities worthy of the name.

## Satisfying Processes

Enthusiasm for learning communities was palpable in these schools. Nearly all the educators we interviewed said they were having conversations with colleagues that resembled none experienced previously. As one veteran exclaimed, "I have been here 33 years, and I have never seen as much dialogue and information flowing."

The training sessions with National School Reform Faculty coaches and the learning community meetings proved satisfying primarily because they differed dramatically from teachers' other professional gatherings. Participants offered three reasons for the contrast:

- CLCs established group-originated norms for interactions. Prohibitions against "bird-walking" (straying from the topic) and commitments to "honor the time" (being prompt and both physically and mentally present), for instance, made educators feel they were not wasting time.
- Each session defined a focus or purpose. Participants did more than bide their time, because they perceived the task at hand as relevant rather than perfunctory.
- Participants had equal opportunities to talk and thus heard diverse perspectives.

## Voluntary Participation

Participants were convinced that the learning community approach works best when teachers join willingly. They reached this conclusion through both positive and negative experiences. On the positive side, a host of educators described themselves and some of their colleagues as always seeking outlets to grow professionally. Arriving early, staying late, and sacrificing individual planning time was of little concern to them. Engaging in discussions with similarly inclined peers was its own reward. As one teacher noted, learning in self-selected groups meant that they did not have to "be around the naysayers." Negative experiences informing this perspective emerged when district leaders, overeager to harness learning communities' enthusiasm as a force for systemwide change, tried to kick-start the process—with little success. One district, for instance, renamed all existing groups with official meeting times "collaborative learning communities" and required that they adopt CLC processes, such as following protocols. Despite the new label, the groups continued to address district-defined issues rather than organic concerns, and there were not enough skilled facilitators to cope with such a massive scaling up. The result was a symbolic acknowledgement of CLCs' potential but a substantive failure to spur new learning. Various other attempts to mandate communities occurred over the project's lifetime. Although some district officials viewed such pressure as signs of commitment to the initiative, CLC advocates agreed that obligatory participation violated the spirit of the project.

## Principal Support

Most principals who were eager to see CLCs take hold fostered them in more subtle ways than cajoling teachers to join or blatantly cheerleading. They encouraged the groups without fanfare through such actions as

- Using protocols associated with learning communities in regular meetings (but not preaching about protocols).
- Purchasing necessary materials, such as the reading and math integration book that one CLC used.
- Handwriting thank-you notes to CLC participants for their efforts.
- Preserving the sanctity of learning community time even when the kind of crises that often flare up in urban schools demanded attention.

One teacher noted,

Our principal always thinks of using collaborative inquiry when we're doing any kind of planning and is always willing for people to get together to talk about things. She got behind a book club, and we received hours of professional growth credit for that.

## A Cadre of Facilitators

Teachers often pointed to the skill of their internal facilitators as essential to the groups' progress. For most of the project's five years, especially the first two, funding enabled many facilitators to meet jointly with the external coaches from the National School Reform Faculty, which was invaluable. As one facilitator said, [The coach] kept us focused and nudged us along. She always had relevant strategies and text to engage us. She provoked critical thinking that we needed.

Additional local leaders came on board each year. Once the internal facilitators began creating school-based communities and had less regular contact with coaches, they yearned to continue to discuss their groups with other facilitators, select protocols, and debrief about sessions, just as they had in training. They realized this would only be possible if their buildings had several staff members in this role.

By the third year of implementation, district-based facilitators had taken over much of the function of outside coaches. These facilitators became responsible for planning and carrying out the summer and weekend retreats at which new and continuing CLC leaders received guidance. They also provided on-site support to each community. Each district had four internal lead facilitators who ensured that a good core of teachers at each individual school felt comfortable leading groups. Through this snowball effect, a cadre developed. Having a cadre of facilitators preserves a presence of teachers knowledgeable about learning communities to carry on in a school if a supportive principal leaves.

## Taking the Crucial Step

Our experience suggests that learning communities' potential to provide stimulating and safe learning environments is more likely to be realized when these six conditions are present. Even with these conditions in place, however, some participants believed their groups settled for "improved talk"—what Rick DuFour (2003) calls "collaboration lite." These factors pave the way for teacher learning, but do not necessarily push participants to act on what they learn. The instigative factor in making learning communities vital vehicles for school improvement is a shared commitment to risking something different. Consider the accomplishments of the communities sketched at the beginning of this article—redesigning an inadequate lesson plan template and trying experimental strategies in math class. The crucial step was a commitment to action.

## References

DuFour, R. (2003). Leading edge: "Collaboration lite" puts student achievement on a starvation diet. *Journal of Staff Development*, 24(3), 63–64.

Hyde, A. (2006). *Comprehending math: Adapting reading strategies to teach mathematics, K–6*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

## Endnote

<sup>1</sup> The University of Southern Maine supported our research.